

This Week in Congress

July 30, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." The House passed legislation this week to fund transportation and housing programs as well as the Departments of Justice and Commerce. I hope you find this newsletter useful.

House Passes Farm Bill Despite Objections of Farm State Lawmakers

On Friday, the House passed the 2007 Farm Bill. The bill funds commodity payments to farmers, food stamps, rural development and conservation programs for the next five years. While recent farm bills have contained substantial funding for food stamps, more than 67 percent of the funding in this year's bill goes to food stamps and other nutrition programs. Only a portion of the funds are directed toward making sure our farmers stay in business when crops fail or disasters strike.

Although the House-passed version of the farm bill contained many components of the 2002 Farm Bill, I am concerned about changes made to the commodity title. In the 2002 Farm Bill, 27 percent of the funds went to providing a safety net for America's farmers. In the bill passed by the House on Friday, the percentage was more than cut in half. In addition to this cut, partial counter cyclical payments were abolished in the 2010 crop year and advanced direct payments were abolished in the 2011 crop year. Furthermore, crop insurance, an important component of the safety net for farmers, was cut by \$3 billion dollars.

Those of us who represent our nation's farmers and ranchers have our work cut out for us, but there remains opportunity to improve the commodity title. The 2007 Farm Bill is one of the most important pieces of legislation for Kansas that will be considered this year. As the farm bill continues its way through the legislative process, I will continue fighting for a bill that meets the needs of rural America. We must make certain Congress never forgets who provides our food, clothing and now our energy.

[Click here](#) to listen to my comments on the passage of the 2007 Farm Bill.

Briefing Farm State Senators on the House Version of the Farm Bill

Before the House voted this week to pass the 2007 Farm Bill, I met with Senators Charles Grassley of Iowa, Thad Cochran of Mississippi, Larry Craig of Idaho and John Thune of South Dakota to give them an update on the status of the farm bill. While the House has completed consideration of this legislation, the Senate Agriculture Committee has yet to approve a bill. The Senate Agriculture Committee plans to begin work on the bill in September.

Visiting the United Nations, Pressuring International Community to Act in Darfur

At the beginning of the week, I visited the United Nations (UN) in New York City with House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer to meet with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Ambassadors to the UN from Egypt, China and the United States. We went to visit with UN officials following reports of increased violence in Sudan despite promised troop increases to secure the region.

I visited Darfur in April to see for myself the conditions the people of Sudan are enduring and meet with government officials and humanitarian leaders to discuss ways to end the conflict. The situation in Sudan cries out for world attention. The crisis is ongoing and people are continuing to suffer and die everyday. Humanitarian workers have been attacked and killed, suspending operations to aid those who are suffering. It is long past time for action by the UN and international community. We need a united front with countries like Egypt and China to pressure Sudan to allow peacekeeping troops into the region of Darfur.

Today, the House is expected to vote on a bill I sponsored that allows individual Americans to join in the fight against genocide by putting economic pressure on Sudan to end the violence in Darfur. [Click here](#) to read a summary about this bill.

Participating in Hearings on Gulf War Illnesses, Mental Health Issues among Veterans

I participated in a hearing this week of the Committee on Veterans Affairs that focused on Gulf War exposures. Witnesses spoke about the incidence of Lou Gehrig's disease among Gulf War veterans, concerns about the military's anthrax vaccinations and the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) research and treatment of Gulf War illnesses. Special thanks to K-State professor Dr. Lea Steele for her testimony.

I chaired the Health Subcommittee during the last hearing on this topic and I am pleased Congress is following up on this work. We must make sure our government is giving this important issue the attention it deserves - both for veterans who served in the Gulf War and to make sure similar problems do not affect our troops serving today.

I also attended a hearing of the Committee to review VA compensation for veterans with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and to investigate allegations that the military is inappropriately diagnosing service members with mental health conditions.

Edwards and Pawnee Counties Declared Federal Disaster Area for Third Time

This week, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) broadened a federal disaster declaration to extend relief to residents of Edwards and Pawnee Counties. The disaster declaration makes qualified individuals in Edwards and Pawnee Counties eligible for help from federal programs including housing and small business.

Of the 65 counties in the Big First Congressional District that have been declared a federal disaster area this year, only Edwards and Pawnee have been declared all three times. The first designation came after the winter storm in late December; the next after the storms, tornadoes and flooding in early May; and now after the storms and flooding that started June 26. This additional assistance will help residents cleanup and recover from the severe storms and flooding that occurred in late June and early July.

Attending the Annual Czech Festival in Wilson

I was in Wilson on Saturday to participate in the annual After Harvest Czech Festival and parade. The weekend events featured traditional Czech food, music, crafts and dancing. During the parade, I presented Betty Ketka-Belton with the Grand Marshall plaque on behalf of the Wilson Chamber of Commerce. Betty was a local school teacher who volunteered many hours helping organize the yearly festivities. Congratulations to Betty and thanks to Pep Shanellec for letting me ride in his car and to Rick Syler for driving me in the parade.

In the Office

Mary Tritsch and Andrea Bozarth of Topeka and Maren Turner and Ernie Kutzley of Lawrence were in with AARP of Kansas to talk about the "Divided We Fail" campaign. I was pleased to sign the pledge for the campaign, which encourages lawmakers to put aside politics and focus on establishing a healthier, more prosperous future for Americans. Deb Ayers-Geist of Kansas City, Gene Haydock of Halstead, Marilyn Herr of Andover and Jacque Feist of Dodge City were in with the National Association of School Principals to discuss ways to improve the No Child Left Behind law and tell me about the pending shortage of school administrators.

Dr. Rand O'Donnell and Genny Nicholas of Leawood were in with Children's Mercy Hospital to explain the services the hospital offers and talk about the need to fund graduate medical education programs. Don Rezac of Emmett, Ronald Brown of Fort Scott, Gene Albers of Cunningham, Jon Starns of Brewster and Patrick Lehman of Lawrence were in with the Kansas Association of Conservation Districts to advocate for allowing Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) offices to remain open and continue administering U.S. Department of Agriculture conservation programs. Kansas Farmers Union President Donn Teske of Wheaton was in to talk about how certain farm bill provisions would affect Kansans.

Also this week, I visited with Girls Nation Senators Paige Blevins of Great Bend and Erin Thimmesch of Lawrence who were in our nation's capital as representatives of Kansas Girls State. President of the National Association of Wheat Growers John Thaemert of Sylvan Grove was in to talk about new tax provisions included in the farm bill. Jennifer Wellnitz of Neosha Rapids was in to tell me about her summer internship with National Farmers Union. Sandra Ames of Olathe and Lori Franklin of Overland Park were in representing the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to advocate for increased teacher quality. Kansas Senator Nick Jordan of Shawnee also stopped by to visit.

Many Kansans stopped by my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol, including Ronnie and Nancy Young of Ulysses, Matt and Kristin Brenzikofer of Clay Center, Dan and Jo Martin of Salina, Tate and Hunter Jaeger of Olathe, and Alan and Shirley Windhorst of Minneapolis. In from Hutchinson were Laine Moore, Annette Morgan, and Ronald, Cathy, Kyle, and Kathleen Emery. Jerry and Julie Martin and Travis Floyd of Lawrence came by for a tour, as did David, Karen, Margaret, Casey and Clay Gorrell of Brookville. Merwin, Susan, Jessica and Kelly Johnson of Lyons were in, as were Lyle, Peggy, Tanya, Brandon, Jaden and Tinesse Friesen of Meade.

Very truly yours,

Jerry